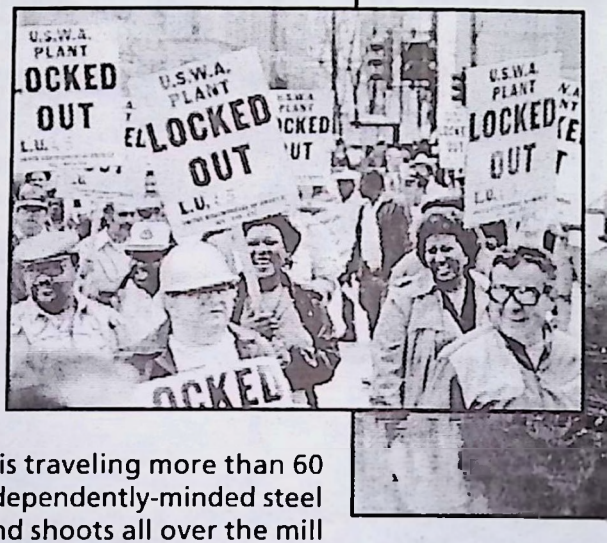
Fighting the boss – putting righteous anger to work

By Roberta Wood

Mad as hell. I know that any worker – whether you're on the assembly line, or under the hot sun picking tomatoes or on aching feet all day long waiting tables – all of us have felt that deep anger and hurt well up 'til you could just explode. There is something you can do, but I'll get to that later.

My story begins at the point where the steel comes out of the furnace, just cooled from red hot to steel colored. It's 900 degrees now – if you wrap a taco in a wad of aluminum foil and tuck it in a coil, it'll make a nice steaming hot surprise for the inspectors down the line in a minute or two.



I really don't have time for too many treats. U.S. Steel has just opened "the world's greatest rod mill." It turns out that what's so "great" is it churns out hundreds of tons a shift with just a skeleton crew.

The process begins with the steel billets being heated to a few thousand degrees, then rolled back and forth between rollers till perfectly round and perhaps 5/8 inch in diameter. The rolls stretch out the 40 foot billet to thousands of feet, like a toddlers' hands making snakes out of play dough. The finished product is traveling more than 60 miles an hour. Once in a while, the independently-minded steel spaghetti escapes the roller guides and shoots all over the mill while everyone dives for cover. But if everything goes OK, when the final rollers spit out the finished steel, it wraps itself around a hook and forms a coil suspended from the overhead conveyor.

Our team is made up of me, my best friend Carole – a tall, glamorous aspiring model – and Faulkner, a middle-aged gruff, grizzled, scowling sweetheart of a guy who good-naturedly takes in stride all the ribbing he gets for working with two young women.

From the first minute on this job, we are burning up. Besides wearing the standard safety shoes and glasses, our hard hats are weighted down with full face shields and ear muffs, our arms covered with laced-up leather arm protectors, our hands shrouded in huge asbestos mitts.

We felt like space men. In fact, when big-shot tours of the new facility came through – businessmen in suits stare at workers like monkeys in the zoo – the three of us would go through our work routine stiff-armed and -legged like robots and then stand at attention staring back. They wouldn't know if we were making fun of them or just crazy, and would quickly move on.

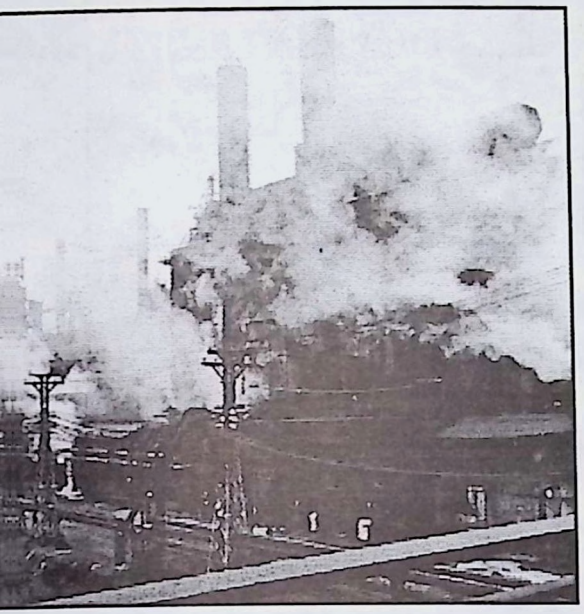
We cut the ends off the coils with enormous bolt cutters; for eight or ten-hour shifts (this is 100 percent true) we had no breaks and no lunch. The line never stopped except for breakdowns. And the world's greatest rod mill included no relief workers.

To go to the bathroom or get some water, you had to work your way up to the front of the line, dash off and get back to try to catch up. We'd eat a sandwich

while sitting on top of a pile of scrap whenever the line went down for a few minutes.

The day came when the line never stopped. The mill rolled flat out 10 hours. I paged and paged my foreman, a young Howdy Doody look-alike named McKee, for relief to go to the bathroom. But all the bosses, "blue hats," were busy yucking it up together hoping for a record-breaking shift.

Sweat was rolling down my face, my glasses were sliding off my nose. The hot springy steel was springing into shirt sleeves and collars, leaving ugly welts. We had an escalating battle going with the inspectors who kept closing the truck door. True it was 10 below outside, but working frantically over hot steel in our space suits, we were burning up. Now what? With the number "500" painted on a coil by the now-giddy foremen, the mill record was broken – so were my arms.



The blue hat swarm approached. You're lagging a bit, can you pick it up? Now we were really burning up. With 15 minutes to go, the three of us just walked away.

Next day our crew received formal invitations to a USS-sponsored dinner to celebrate the new record. Carole, Faulkner and I had a special message clipped to ours: "You left your assigned work station without permission causing mill to shut down ... could result in further disciplinary action ... blah, blah."

Not so long afterwards, they welded shut the door of the world's greatest rod mill, its profits invested in Marathon Oil, Florida real estate, a mill in Taiwan, who knows what else.

We were left with our written reprimands, indigestion from a greasy dinner and several cheap cigars and dried-up carnations – rewards for subsequent broken records.

If steel mills and other industrial enterprises weren't owned by heartless investors who couldn't tell an ingot from an iguana but by us, the working class as a whole, the profits could go into improving our workplace, shortening our workweek and making life better for our children and communities.

The Communist Party fights every shop floor injustice, from stolen pensions to stolen break times. But it also fights for a revolution in how society is organized so that all of us who work together, the working class, can own and run things together the way we know they should be run.

Anger can be positive when it turns into determination and resolve. Why not put your righteous anger to work today and join the Communist Party?

Roberta Wood, a former steelworker, is a member of the national committee of the Communist Party USA.

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